

TECHNIQUES OF THE IMAGINATION IN THE TRIBUNE: STEWARDING AND THE GUIDEBOOK AT STRAWBERRY HILL HOUSE, TWICKENHAMⁱ

Jonathan Skinner, University of Roehampton

Jonathan Skinner is Reader in Social Anthropology at the University of Roehampton. His interests are in the anthropology of leisure: specifically tourism regeneration and tour guiding, contested heritage and dark tourism, and social dancing and wellbeing. He has worked in the Caribbean, US and UK. His most recent publication is *Leisure and Death: Lively Encounters with Risk, Death, and Dying* (2018, co-edited with Adam Kaul, University of Colorado Press).

Abstract

This article examines heritage-making first-hand through the techniques of the imagination visiting Strawberry Hill House, Twickenham, the Summer house and Gothic castle of Horace Walpole. Walpole developed Strawberry Hill as an architectural experiment in visitor emotions. In a now seemingly empty historic house, Walpole's sleights of hand are being carefully and authentically conserved to fulfil the imaginations and expectations of the tourist as though a tour guide from beyond the grave. A detailed exploration of this staged encounter in the Tribune Room during a temporary exhibition highlights the workings of the tourist imaginary and the techniques and technologies of the visit, in particular the use of a 1774 guidebook as a resource for self-guided tourists, in conservation work, and the virtual development of the house as an award-winning heritage destination.

Keywords: tour guide, guidebook, tourism, Strawberry Hill House

Opening

The old lady walks into the room I am observing and looks around. "This is not art!" she shouts at me and anyone else in the room. She walks around the exhibit, and looks up to the ceiling. "This is art!" As she leaves the room she jumps up and down on part of the new exhibit in the room, shocking other visitors and leaving me stunned at the animosity being expressed. She is gone before I can challenge her.

I have been left for several years with this lady's physical reaction to what she was seeing and how she was feeling. She was on a self-guided tour of an historical heritage institution with contemporary sculpture installation carefully placed through the rooms. Her reaction was extreme and embodied if not violent, passing on with a performance her feelings. Such animation contrasted with the calm steady flow of visitors to the room. Some agreed with her but didn't dare to express themselves in such a fashion. Others recoiled in shock at her destructive jumps when I recounted the event. It certainly interrupted one afternoon in the Tribune Room at Strawberry Hill House, Twickenham (See Fig. 1.0).

Fig. 1.0 Summer fête at Strawberry Hill with Days of Judgement (Cats) by Laura Ford. Photo by J. Skinner, August 2015.

Docent Fieldwork

This article is about the first-hand reactions to a heritage site. It focuses upon influences, reactions and mis-directions at play in and around the temporary Laura Ford exhibition at Strawberry Hill, June-November 2015 as a 'study of tourism from the inside' as Bruner (2005, 1) deems it. Since 2014, I have volunteered as a room steward at the house, favouring – or

specializing in - the Tribune Room built by Georgian era novelist and Cervantes-styled 'Prince of Wits' Horace Walpole. This is docent fieldwork where I sit once a month in a largely empty room and observe visitor reactions. These afternoons contrast with my more regular body-involved fieldwork on the dance floor (Skinner 2010). Here, my research method is more static, relying upon the eyes and ears reading the visitors just as they read their guides and react to the texts as well as the walls of the house. I note down visitor sketches. What do they make of the room? How do they react? Does it live up to their expectations or not? Often we break the ice and a conversation strikes up about the room, the former owner and his taste, and I launch into my repertoire of knowledge about it; the tourists have guide books containing similar information but it is easier and friendlier to have it delivered to them by another person. Some, however, bypass the room entirely.

The docent is typically a learned person who greets the visitor. Whilst there are a number of very vivid studies of the tour guide as native (Bunten 2015), cosmopolitan (Salazar 2010), urban re-animator ("the ground troops of the travel industry" [Wynn 2011: 6]), as witness (Feldman 2008: 67) and as general entertainer/trouble-shooter (Costa 2009), the docent in the gallery or museum or heritage destination has been studied less. As docents, we have not been trained as the traditional 'pathfinders' examined originally by Erik Cohen (1985). Nor are we the 'cultural mediators' that Sharon Macdonald (2006) walked and worked with at Nuremburg as they decoded the Nazi architecture for the awkward visitors, 'façade peeling' (130) as she refers to it. We are trained in identifying the types and needs of the visitors to the house (the middle class older couple, the reader, the specialist, the friends, the solo visitor, the family) and we have rehearsed ways of interaction or non-interaction should the visitor need or look like they want assistance (the mini-lecture [large-group engagement], the teaser [unsolicited information to pique interest and conversation], the smile [non-verbal acknowledgement of the visitor]) (SHH 2015a). Our mission statement is to 'tell the stories of Horace Walpole and Frances Waldegrave while preserving and sustaining their residence, the elegant and eccentric gothic castle Strawberry Hill' (SHH 2015b). The room stewards at Strawberry Hill House 'bring the history and stories of Strawberry Hill to life' (SHH 2015c). They are passive communicators, both 'interpreters' of their room and 'custodians' for it. Their voluntary work has to be carried out in a 'customer friendly way' so that visitors have 'an enjoyable and safe visit' (SHH 2015c).

We engage our visitors with stories, re-animating the rooms for the season (10,040 visitors in 2017). When Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995, 369) writes, '[a] key to heritage is its virtuality, whether in the presence or the absence of actualities', her words connect closely with the heritage of Strawberry Hill House, an empty house enlivened by stewards and their scripts. The stewards assist with the visitors' interpretation of what she refers to as 'a hyperreal past', one that relies upon the imagination to produce a heritage in the present. These heritage relationships are a 'collaborative hallucination' decried by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995, 375), virtual in their "hereness": phantoms animated by plaques, memorials, and other instruments to commandeer the imagination and suggest an Otherness - Lowenthal's (1985) 'past as a foreign country', one recognisably similar but also markedly different. A room steward at Strawberry Hill, then, is a static facilitator of interpretations of a hyperreal past; Strawberry Hill House is a physical phantasm inhabited by phantom figures consumed by the public as they see fit (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 387). We allow them to linger in an ethereal heritage firmament, Strawberry Hill, as backdrop for our imaginations.

Strawberry Hill and guiding techniques and technologies

Heritage houses are lodestones to an imagined past. At Strawberry Hill House, the imagination can and has run riot. Strawberry Hill House, Twickenham, was the summer house and Gothic Castle of Horace Walpole (1717-1797). Walpole developed Strawberry Hill as an architectural

experiment in visitor emotions, playing with them to instil a state of ‘gloomth’ – a term that he coined to express an affective reaction of ‘gloom’ and ‘warmth’. Living off sinecures set up by his father, Robert Walpole, the first Prime Minister of Great Britain, his son Horace spent a lifetime re-modelling his summer house into a Gothic-styled castle. In his own words, Walpole (1753, 372) gained deep satisfaction ‘imprinting the gloomth of abbeys and cathedrals on one's house’. He spent much of his lifetime revamping the place, turning a relatively simple cottage – known locally as ‘Chopped-Straw Hall’ - that he had purchased in 1747 into a Gothic revival castle with pinnacles, battlements, vaults, turrets and medieval-styled ancestral ceiling paintings by the time of his death in 1797. In a letter to Harry Conway, Walpole described it: ‘It is a plaything-house, that I have got out of Mrs. Chevenix's shop, and it is the prettiest bauble you ever saw’ (Walpole 1747, 269); Walpole bought the remainder of the lease on the property from Mrs Chevenix who ran an exclusive and well known toy shop in London. His critics might have had little compassion for his ‘self-indulgent bauble’ (Sabor 1995, iii) that went against the trend in Palladian and classical architecture.

Visitors come to Strawberry Hill House to see the castle that Walpole built. They also come to flesh out their imagination of the man, a prolific satiric letter writer and chronicler of eighteenth century Georgian life, grand tourist and travel collector, gothic revivalist and novelist, libertine and ‘outsider’ (Mowl 2010). Walpole was a man of letters, many many letters, with over 6,000 known correspondences carefully published in 1937 in 48 volumes by the American collector/scholar WS Lewis and now held online at Yale University's The Lewis Walpole Library (Lewis 1937-1983). The letters “flesh out” the house for volunteers, visitors, guides and stewards. They detail its development as either the eccentric mixed-up abode of a contriving dilettante, or the visionary preserve of the man who ushered in the Gothic revival, with “Gothick” architecture and inventive writings that went on to influence Mary Shelley and Victorian Gothick literature. They attract the visitor and play an active part in the appreciation of the house and the man.

In a now seemingly empty historic house, Walpole's sleights of hand are carefully and authentically conserved, restored and further mediated to fulfil the imaginations and expectations of the tourist under the guidance of The Strawberry Hill Trust and their staff, and the watchful eyes of the Friends of Strawberry Hill volunteers. In cultural terms, or ‘the politics of connoisseurship’ (Bruner 1005, 163), the Trust ‘authenticates’ the work on the house and the Friends regulate it. Both enact a deep and sensitive understanding of taste *à la* Walpole. This creates a doubly staged encounter zone. In the eighteenth century, Walpole developed Strawberry Hill as an architectural experiment in visitor emotions with Medieval-inspired exteriors, trompe d'oeil decorations to give the impression of Medieval Gothic permanence, and faux papier-mâché interiors to connote splendour, all complemented with a staged assemblage of over 4,000 curiosities ranging from Cardinal Wolsey's hat to a bust of Medusa, an exotic armory and intricate collection of Holbein miniatures. These *objets d'art* turned the house into a tourist attraction. Walpole (1784) himself encouraged paying visitors to his house and in 1784 published a detailed guidebook with sketches that is now used as a pamphlet for self-guided tourists and in conservation and the virtual development of the house as an award-winning heritage destination. This guidebook is particularly important following the sale in 1842 of the contents of the house. It is a prop for tourists to rely upon in front of them rather than face the ‘empty’ rooms with an unmediated gaze, and for guides to use in picking up and describing the now empty rooms to the critical tourists' gaze and to cultivate the tourists' imagination and fulfil their period expectations.

The house and the man divided opinion then and continue to do so today. Grayford (2010) describes Walpole as an Oscar Wilde or Kenneth Williams of the eighteenth century. He sees the place as an eccentric English reaction to baroque public and religious trends on the Continent: ‘rococo paganism in the boudoir’ (Fallowell 2010) for a man with ‘skittish’ and

‘lyrical’ but ‘lonely’ tendencies. It is an ‘architectural collage’ (Gayford 2017) that directly challenged the ordered Palladian style of the day with, for example, a staircase based upon one in Rouen Cathedral; fireplaces based on medieval tombs; ceiling designs developed from a rose window seen in St Paul’s Cathedral; a reception room derived from the funeral chapel of Henry VII. It is a house that continues to stay ahead of its time and is now back in fashion with its postmodern pastiche and parody. It is a theatrical stage with texture and all manner of sets: the dark entrance hall is decorated with wall designs from Prince Arthur’s tomb at Worcester cathedral, a wallpaper that looks like stone carving; the library has a recreated medieval painting of jousting knights; the gallery glitters with gold leaf overlaying papier-mache. The result is ‘a spectacular conjuring trick’ (Kennedy 2015), a ‘fantasy castle’ of architectural tricks that attract and impel the viewer to visit and try to fathom the man. It is as though Walpole were writing and designing for posterity – a guide absent, now relying upon us stewards. His tourists were charged entry to the house and shown around by his housekeeper whilst he retired to a more private cottage nearby. He did, however, sell them a guidebook to the house, an invaluable aid for present-day conversation and restoration and a technique for introducing the house to the modern-day visitor.

The original guidebook was published on his own printing press, carefully illustrated and introduced the visitor to Walpole’s house, deliberately positioning his text in the third person before listing – *vade mecum* (cf. Seaton 2002) style – the contents of each room. Its title was *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole, Youngest Son of Sir Robert Walpole Earl of Orford, at Strawberry-Hill near Twickenham, Middlesex. With an Inventory of the Furniture, Pictures, Curiosities, &c.* (Walpole 1784). Its Preface begins as follows:

It will look, I fear, a little like arrogance in a private Man to give a printed Description of his Villa and Collection, in which almost every thing is diminutive. It is not, however, intended for public sale, and originally was meant only to assist those who should visit the place. A farther view succeeded; that of exhibiting specimens of Gothic architecture, as collected from standards in cathedrals and chapel-tombs, and showing how they may be applied to chimney-pieces, cieling[sic.], windows, ballustrades, loggias, &c. The general disuse of Gothic architecture, and the decay and alterations so frequently made in churches, give prints a chance of being the sole preservatives of that style. (Walpole 1784, i)

The modern guidebook is notebook size, using the front plate from the original as its cover and extracts from the Preface and each room description to briefly orientate the reader in the House. But there are additional explanations of the work the Strawberry Hill Trust has done in the restoration of each room. At the start there is also the declared intention to bring back as many objects from the rooms back to the house once their provenance has been tracked down. There are floor maps for readers to orientate themselves. Moreover, as a guidebook, there are indications as to where to walk next:

We have added a modern commentary to Walpole’s guide, which explains recent developments, including the restoration and objects which have returned. A visit to Strawberry Hill was always intended to be a theatrical experience and by following the directions in this booklet you will discover the castle as its creator intended. (SHH 2016)

It is thus intertextual, both informing the reader and directing them through the space of Strawberry Hill House. The start of the description of the villa begins the same way:

It will look, I fear, a little like arrogance in a private Man to give a printed Description of his Villa and Collection, in which almost every thing is diminutive. It is not, however, intended for public sale, and originally was meant only to assist those who should visit the place.

The following paragraph, however, cuts to the end of the Preface, omitting Walpole's rationale for sustaining an interest in the Gothic through his house. He characterizes the house 'capricious' and ancient by design but modern by decoration:

In truth, I did not mean to make my house so gothic as to exclude convenience, and modern refinements in luxury. The designs of the inside and outside are strictly ancient, but the decorations are modern, would our ancestors, before the reformation of architecture, not have deposited in their gloomy castles, antique statues and fine pictures, beautiful vases and ornamental china, if they had possessed them? ---- But I do not mean to defend by argument a small capricious house. It was built to please my own taste, and in some degree to realise my own vision. (Walpole/SHH 1784/2016, 9)

Neither guidebook text is to be trusted despite its claim to authenticity. The latter one gives an impression of the original in its design but adds instructions and follow-on boxes with additional information for the reader, and larger font instruction at the bottom of the page that develop the tourist gaze (cf. Urry 1988) for the modern - twenty-first century modern – tourist:

Your ticket will allow you entry at a specific time. Please feel free to look around the main garden, this courtyard and the small Prior's Garden while you wait. After a short introduction to the house, enter through the front door. (Walpole/SHH 1784/2016, 11)

This is, however, in keeping with Walpole's trickster style of narration. His writings as much as his building contain subterfuge and deliberately mislead the reader. Many of the letters that he did not want recorded for posterity were destroyed. Moreover, he is also known for the Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* that he published in 1764. Rather than claim authorship for it, though, Walpole presented the novel as a translation by pseudonymous character William Marshal who had been working from a fictional sixteenth century Italian manuscript written by Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St Nicholas at Otranto. These layers of design 'spooft' the reader into thinking the account true, at least, in part; and could serve as inspiration not just for eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic novelists. These are techniques designed to intentionally lead the reader/viewer of letters, book, and tourist site in particular (mis)directions. Writing about Walpole in a guide to the sale of the contents of the house in 1842, we read how he was viewed as a paradox:

Horace Walpole was one of the most remarkable personages of the last century, but his character was made up of paradoxes. He was a worshipper of fashion, and a sneerer at it, - a courtier, while he affected to be a republican, - a grave historian, and a gossip. - a good natured man, and a satirist, - and, though loving his ease, possessed of a more restless spirit of curiosity than ever stimulated even old Pepys himself. (Strong 1843, ix)

It is controversial that the reference to 'gay' is omitted from the new tourist guide's Preface. Though the sense of the word has changed since its original use, it is problematic in that Walpole was an effeminate gentleman who never married and surrounded himself with a close group of male contemporaries. Many visitors to the house visit because he is perceived as a gay icon, expressing himself through his building when homosexuality was illegal. For them, the gothic castle is a camp structure, sometimes brought to life by theatrical tour guides ("look around you: the queer man gets hold of you!"), but sometimes denied by conservative room stewards ("the jury is out: there is no written evidence"). This occasionally creates an awkwardness in the tours. As such Strawberry Hill is, quite literally, one of Dean MacCannell's (1992) 'empty meeting grounds': it is a tourist construction where diverse feelings and reactions to the building are elicited, as well as multiple subject formations projected upon its creator.

Tribune Swag

“Hi! Welcome to the Tribune room. This is where Walpole kept his more precious objects.” This is the room that I spend my hours in, sitting in an alcove, discrete unless disturbed by a question or a soliciting gaze or tentative inquiry. I have been schooled and trained to respond about the Tribune room or any other room that I am scheduled to steward in. This is my favourite room and I feel confident and comfortable in it. I have sat in it for several years now. Other rooms would necessitate recapping on their significance, reading and memorizing key details. The Tribune room lends itself easily to description due to its purpose and structure. It is entered from the Long Gallery full of light and gold leaf. It is a dark room, a square with four circular alcoves breaking the sides of the square and entrance. It is nineteen feet from entrance alcove to window alcove and each alcove is five feet in length. The Tribune is entered by passing through a wooden swing door with lattice bars, like a prison door. Walpole kept it shut for the usual ticketed visitors, but let in his special guests. It can be used for dramatic effect, with tour guides closing it behind them ahead of their spiel (See Fig. 1.1). The room is empty but has a vaulted ceiling curving in towards a modern-like glass roof. There are two stained-glass windows in the alcoves opposite the entrance. On the right, as you enter, the alcove has been raised. On the left, the window shutters are closed and chairs are set for the room steward. The floor is bare wood.

In the first year of room stewarding, there were two ‘props’ for the room. On the left was – and is to this day - a tall wooden podium with a tray and two wings containing interesting information about the current room that they are in. This is window dressing of the room for the tourist. On old thick paper are photocopies of a letter from Walpole describing his Tribune room. There is a reproduction of Caligula’s head, a bust found in Herculaneum, one of Walpole’s most prized possessions, and there are some postcard-sized copies of art work that show the room when it was full of possessions and a detail of the cabinet that sat in a raised semi-circular recess above a black and gold altar. One looks to be a painting c.1789 by architect John Carter of The Cabinet, as the room was sometimes colloquially called; the view is from the room steward’s perspective front on to the altar whereas the Edward Edwards watercolour drawing of 1781 is from the entrance to the room. On the right of the entrance way there is a small digital screen cycling through images of the Tribune Room. Today, the room is dominated by a two-metre-high female kangaroo, steel sculpted with jesmonite and covered in sacking cloth. Her pouch is full and she has a startled expression facing the visitor coming into the room. Perhaps she has been caught looting from Walpole’s Tribune collection?

Fig. 1.1 Walpole’s Tribune Room with Kangaroo by Laura Ford. Photo by J. Skinner, October 2015.

The room is featured on pages 32 and 33 of the new guidebook (See Fig. 1.2). On the left side there is an introduction to the room followed by a boxed off commentary upon the room and a final instruction in a larger modern font: ‘Now leave this room, turn left and continue until you reach the Great North Bedchamber’ (SHH 2016, 32). On the right-hand page is a reproduction of a watercolour drawing (1781) by Edward Edwards held by the Lewis Walpole Library at Yale University. It shows an angled view of the room to include stools, the altar and cabinet, pictures filling the room and the recess between the windows filled with a bronzed plaster cast of Lady Catharine Walpole, Horace Walpole’s mother, modelled from her statue in Westminster Abbey. Walpole’s ‘Cabinet’ is to the right of the centre of the picture as the main feature.

The first part of the text is taken direct from Walpole’s guide to the Villa:

It is square with a semicircular recess in the middle of each side, painted stone colour with gilt ornaments, and with windows and niches, the latter taken from those on the sides of the north door of the great church at St Alban's; the roof, which is taken from the chapter-house at York, is terminated by star of yellow glass that throws a golden gloom all over the room, and with the painted windows gives the solemn air of a rich chapel... The grated door was designed by Sir Thomas Pitt. (SHH 2016, 32)

The last sentence is edited from the end of the following paragraph. Whereas the original text in between mentions the key objects in the room, the edit draws attention to a current feature of the room, its dramatic entrance that gives it the impression on a bank vault for valuables. The remainder of the page, and majority of text, consists of four bullet points with each bullet a quatrefoil design that resembles the architectural tracery found in the house and on the wallpaper.

- ❖ This was Walpole's 'treasure house' in which he kept some of his most valuable possessions. The 'grated' door was built as in a bank vault where visitors were allowed to peer through; only the most favoured being allowed to enter.
- ❖ In this room was the fine cabinet of rose-wood, designed by Mr Walpole, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which contained his priceless collection of miniatures and other valuable items.
- ❖ The windows were constructed in three layers: a clear glass window, a coloured glass panel and a wooden shutter. All could be retracted into the roof space.
- ❖ A fitted carpet covered the floor with a star in the centre echoing that in the ceiling. The Trust hopes to replicate this in due course. (SHH 2016, 32)

These bullet points are written by the Strawberry Hill Trust for the self-guiding visitor. They introduce the room from the door and the windows to the absent cabinet and carpet. They succinctly set the scene for the reader/viewer as they enter the room and recreate it from the guide, the painting and digital display, the podium and their imagination. The intention is for the self-guided tourist to turn into the dark, enclosed Tribune after visiting the long Gallery (56ft long) sparkling with gilded ceiling and expansive with windows to the gardens and mirrors to reflect the light. The contrast is deliberate. It takes a few seconds for the eyes to adjust to the low level luminosity – Walpole's gloomth and now Ford's animal. The viewer is typically drawn, then, to the two stained glass windows visible, and to the warm orange glow from the glass in the roof. Gone are the several hundred objects listed in the guidebook from pages 76 to 102. I might point some of them out to the interested visitor: Henry VIII's dagger, Holbein miniatures, Lady Walpole's statue, a wooden cravat tie, Caligula with the lively silver eyes, and the cabinet and the door featured in the guidebook. And yet, for all this, the visitors and room steward are entering an empty room.

Fig. 1.2 The Tribune pages from the modern guidebook. Edwards painting image courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Photo by J. Skinner, September 2017.

Fig. 1.3 Tribune Room from the visitor's perspective. Photo by J. Skinner, October 2015.

Guides, Students and Visitor reactions

The reactions to Strawberry Hill House and the Tribune Room, in particular, come from three cohorts of students working with tour guides giving tours, debriefing the tours and analyzing them for their assignments. Moreover, for three seasons, I regularly sat in the Tribune Room

looking at visitor reactions to the room, talking and stewarding visitors in the room should they seem to want contact. I also followed over half a dozen public tours, volunteer re-training walk-throughs and new tour route illustrations through the house, and interviewed six tour guides at length. This does not, however, seek to be a comprehensive analysis of the tour, but rather, reactions to the Tribune Room, and the importance of the prop in the enhancement of the tourist experience and tourist's imagination.

Guides

The guides did not make use of the Trust's props in the rooms. They relied upon their narrative and, in some cases, their own theatrical presence, to illustrate the tour for the visitor. Several guides dressed up in rich personal costume, developing an association between themselves and the Walpole character and house that they were (re-)presenting. They typically spent about four and a half minutes in each room, and the tour built up a picture of not just the house but also of the man that built the house. Context was thus all important in their demonstration of historical knowledge about the man, the house, the construction and fashioning of each room, and its use and filling. One of the themes was change, with the building illustrating key eras of use from a cottage to a castle to a residence for Vincentian Fathers teaching at the adjacent Catholic Teacher Training College (now St Mary's University). One guide set the scenes with a parallel association: "Think Disneyland castle – amusing, theatrical, inconsistent". The location is certainly treated as a stage set: "A home built for ancestors, a stage set"; "a house of illusion"; "a very theatrical house with the illusion of the ecclesiastical" where things are not as they seem and as they are seen. The story is all important - "It's all about the story" - and the priority is to establish "Gothic gloomth". In short, the guides facilitate Walpole's original "mood journey: dark, light, contrasting atmospheres to affect visitors". The grandiose nature of the man and his constructions is one of the attractions for the guide as well as the one-off visitor. These reactions also carried home with the guides and influenced their room decorations, their visits to other historical houses, gardening and curiosity as to how Walpole would have seen and reacted to their own tourings.

The guide's commentary follows the layout of the house from its entrance to its exit, with detailed points about each room and how it would have looked in the 1750s under the gaze and direction of its owner Horace Walpole. It is as though they inhabit his or his house keeper's mantle and we, the visitors, are those ticketed tourists that visited from Georgian London. On both host and guest sides, we imagine ourselves into roles. This is the inescapable nature of visiting Strawberry Hill House. As two guides pointed out in their spiel:

"What we are doing here is just replicate what he had done for tourists."

"A stoic of Antiquity with a plaything house – his lil' gothic castle that tells us a bit about him: a mad chap - scandalous to build this here. It has a posterity theme. Haunting themes. We are his posterity viewing it now. Do we understand him better for it?"

Walpole was building his future in the house, establishing his Gothic revival style of architecture, and writing his account of the age for future readers. His role has been author and editor of the past. But this was not necessarily new according to architectural editor of Country Life John Goodall who suggested in a talk at Strawberry Hill (9 June 2016) that the idea of building fictional pasts is a common palimpsest of England. Here the Gothic articulates an ancestry that Walpole sought, a practice found later in the exotic Hearst Castle in California built by US news magnate William Randolph Hearst or, more recently, Wisconsin's architecturally diverse House of the Rock that like Strawberry Hill, toys with the visitor, especially their senses and sense of authenticity.

Walpole's Tribune Room is modelled after the Uffizi in Florence, a room crowded in art, keepsake and memorabilia. Some of the guides stand by the grilled door and close it for

dramatic effect, explaining and paraphrasing Walpole: the uninvited guests, “They look with their hands” and so were not allowed beyond the grill. There is thus a sense of specialness about being on the inside of the room, in the vault, so to speak. Here, the illumination is subdued, the light changing during the day to give it an ecclesiastical feel; ironically, the Vincentians consecrated the room. There are numbers on the walls where the pictures would have hung. But now, instead of the objects taking the focus of the room, the papier-mache tracery and the stained glass windows are the object of the tourist’s gaze. There is no outside view and so the association with York Cathedral comes out of the background. Even the tour of the house foregrounds Walpole the man. As one guide remarked, “the house is a theatrical backdrop to his life”. It is his story that is told through the house, “his own fiction in bricks and mortar, as you were”. This man with “the soul of an interior decorator”, “a Gore Vidal rather than an Elton John of his time”, found an imaginative freedom in his Gothic turn. And in the Tribune Room, the gloomth is “a golden gloomth”. For some guides it is their favourite room and it has a sobriety about it. For others, “a bizarreness about it, a showy feel”. It seems to have an appeal, then, for different guides in different ways just as some of the guides and room stewards liked the inclusion of the kangaroo, but others felt it distracted from the windows and architecture of the room.

Students

The cohorts of students visiting Strawberry Hill reacted very differently from each other. For many, it was their first time in a heritage location, and it did not live up to their expectations of an old home, in particular because of its emptiness. The students noted the time of each room narrative and, whilst they too did not engage with the room props, they made use of their mobile phones to take notes, post Instagram images and look up online the objects that the guide was talking about. There was a digital engagement with Strawberry Hill House. It was a near instantaneous engagement with the room and its former objects, a level of connectivity and information that is new to the tourist attraction and had not been anticipated by the guides. This meant that there was reduced eye-contact between the guide and the visitor and the guides commented afterwards with the students that they had found it difficult ‘to read’ their audience and so pitch their narrative accordingly.

The students typically found the house to be an extension of the Walpole character. Several thought that he was “odd”, “macabre”, “a bit of a character”. They were impressed by his vision, “the dream at the centre of this house.” It was certainly larger than life and “a projection of his identity”. There was, however, a disjunct between the guides and their narrative and the expectations and desires for an entertaining and informative experience that the students wanted. They felt that the place had become “too sanitised” in that the rooms were clean, unlivd in but also sterile in their emptiness. There were no sounds or smells that could accompany the tourist experience. This forces the visitor to use their imagination. And yet, if the visitor does not have a knowledge of the Georgian era, then there are few mental constructions of the house’s context for the visitor to tap into. In other words, some of the students struggled to engage imaginatively with the house, to populate it with objects and characters. A number thus welcomed the Laura Ford sculptures for helping them to visit the rooms, but they were not lost to the Georgian era - the temporality of the place remained in the present, sometimes jarringly so; “the sculptures were the air to let me breathe. But there were IKEA lamps in each room!” They suggested a lifesize cutout character of Walpole or a painting at the start of the tour for the visitor to latch onto, some smell sticks and some Georgian music playing in some of the rooms or recorded conversations to listen to. This would provide focus for the narrative they were hearing from the guides, one which featured Walpole but also the different ages of the house. These multiple accounts of the place and restoration points - that were largely eighteenth century but also included the designs and schemes of other subsequent

owners, and what it looked like before it was “returned to Walpole” – confused the students as to the main purpose of the tour. They felt excluded or patronized, even, when the guides assumed fore-knowledge of the Georgian era. When a guide used the expression “of course” in the Tribune Room or anywhere else, the students heard not a rhetoric of inclusion but a discourse alienating them and making them feel ignorant or lacking background knowledge. This ‘script’ was read as talking down to them, belittling.

Visitor reactions

For many general visitors to Strawberry Hill House, the Tribune Room is the favourite room in the house (“I love this room. Come see my treasures! Come into my treasure chamber – its fab!”; “Coolest room to hang out!”). There is an appeal for the vaulted and vault-like empty room with its lists of former items. The altered light is apparent through the ceiling and the stained glass windows. All of the room is photographed respectfully by visitors, even the empty parts (see Fig. 1.3), with one once lying on the floor to capture the best possible image of the ceiling. Like with the guides and the students, visitors expressed a mixture of opinions with respect to the exhibition in the Tribune Room. Mixing eras, the medieval Gothic with a more romantic prehistorical time of myth and legend, one visitor updated her impressions of the house: “Gothic – dragons and now a kangaroo!” This was more apt than the gentleman who confused the Gothic period for Visigoth tribes of Germanic barbarians. Positive reactions to the room are as follows:

“The kangaroo enhances the house with its contemporary texture.”

“Its just mindboggling. Its amazing that she’s matched up her weirdness.”

“The kangaroo adds to the room. You’ve got someone to talk to!”

Some of the visitors came specifically for the Laura Ford exhibition. Others visited Strawberry Hill House at the time of the exhibition and resented the objects intruding in on their experience of the place. They wanted to get lost in Walpole’s creation and were jarred out of it by each of the installations:

“I want to see the house, not this!”

“The kangaroo distracts from the house. What a monstrosity. Lose it!”

“This is the Skippy room! This is the only room that has creeped me out. Nice gilding.”

“I like this empty to view the architecture properly.”

The last comment is particularly telling of the way in which the installation intruded and obscured the direct view of the house and its development

The diversity of reactions to the room is worth noting. They were all impressions; all responses to the entry into the room. None came from an engagement with the digital displays and the materials on the podium. All of the visitors had copies of the tour guidebook and were making extensive reference to it, either reading or paraphrasing the entry to others in their party, or reading it to themselves and then looking to the places in the room or vice versa (Father telling son: “this is magnificent in itself. Each room is just splendid. He did the Gothic revival. What was he like? Such detail. That art is from York Minister. He copied bits from everywhere!”). This was often the place or moment in the tour that the tourists felt it getting dark, not just in terms of luminosity but in terms of the nature of the content linking the place to death - to deceased people who have passed away and to objects of violence or reminders of their passing (daggers, locks of hair, miniature portraits, busts). It is a memorial room, “crypto-religious”. As one visitor remarked, “Sombre and gawdy. This is dark isn’t it!” Another reacted to the room with the comment, “Deep, dark and scary”. The juxtapositions in Walpole’s collection make for an ambivalent response from the visitors: “Fantastic and nightmarish!”; or “It’s fun gloomy!” These place the site on the lighter side of any potential dark tourism

spectrum with other visitors assessing the room in particular as strange or playful but with an attractive quality, for all its over-the-top entertaining fashion:

“Very strange thank you.”

“Very playful. In some ways it’s sad that it’s stripped but in other ways it is rather suffocating.”

“Definitely a shell but beautiful.”

“A curiosity room.”

“So outrageously OTT. Splendid but they must have said, ‘Come on, Walpole, what are you doing?’” “An enormously entertaining building.”

The room befits Walpole the character in the guide book and the historical imagination. It is “brave” and bold in its design, “blooming amazing!” even. Walpole was read into the empty place. One German visitor in a party enjoyed the similarities between Walpole and Ford, between two types of artistic self-exhibition: “I like heritage houses and heard about the exhibition. This I like as a tourist attraction and it is so much about showmanship and stage trickery!” Another associated the whims of Walpole the dilettante and wealthy aristocrat with the present-day financial excesses of the wealthy with his reaction and cynical comment, “Very funny! Nothing changes really.”

Performing tourism and the guidebook

There is an irony about tourism to Strawberry Hill House. It is based upon Walpole’s guide book and constructions, the latter of which is a pastiche of styles and designs from other locations. It copies, mocks and has an intertextuality about it in that designs and objects refer to Walpole’s travels. They are synecdoche stories for his private and public tours. In this way, to take but one room as an example, Walpole’s Tribune - with the wooden door that looks like the door to a vault, and the recontextualised altar underneath a cabinet of curiosities – is a precursor to the postmodern. It is a humorous, remixing, hyperreal representation of the past (cf. Walsh 1992, 56) that attracts and intrigues many visitors. The exactitude of the conservation and restoration work with its attention to detail for the 1780s attempts to historicise this heritage room, with the Strawberry Hill House Trustees deliberately deciding to take it back to this point in time, using the original guidebook as a guideline to the past, the pictures as a sight line to how it really was. The room remains ‘as it was’, frozen and empty barring the desire to repopulate it with the original objects for an anniversary exhibition of items for the 300th anniversary of Walpole’s birth in 1717 (delayed to 2018). It is the guidebook that is the technology of the tour, framing and determining the visit experience for the visitor and it was seen in everyone’s hands as they entered the room. It is far more than an artifact from the eighteenth century. It caters for the credibility of the house and the Ancien tour. It is the device used as architect for a contemporary experience of the house and its history, and the man and his heritage.ⁱⁱ

Walpole’s guidebook is not an introduction to a foreign land. It is a guidebook to his house, where he lives. As such, with its inventory style, it is closer to the museum catalogue than a Baedeker or Fodor country guidebook. This museum-like quality is hardly surprising given that Walpole was a trustee of society physician Sir Hans Sloane’s collection bequested to the nation in 1753 that became the foundation of the British Museum. As a literary style, it is more object-based than memoir or how-to; it is as Seaton (2002, 148) defines this writing, more vade mecum text than belles lettres. The eye is drawn to a particular place filler with a description and provenance than to an emotional engagement with a scene or experience. The modern interpretation of the original guidebook ‘performs’ more of the function of the guidebook as a text that mediates the visitors’ understanding of the place and influences their behavior – what to look for, what to miss and how to progress through the rooms and from room to room. It is

commercial in that it sells the site to the consumer and assumes a particular readership; typically these guidebook users are middle-class according to Peel and Sørensen (2016, 42). Walpole was establishing his aristocratic credentials in the original guidebook that was used to attract wealthy social elite visitors from the centre of London. The Strawberry Hill House Trust are appealing to a far broader constituency of foreign and local visitors, English National Trust members and the general public, as well as those interested in contemporary art for the Laura Ford exhibition. The text written in bullet points is a retrospective explanation to draw the tourists' gaze to particular features and to present an overview and introduction to the room as a self-guide for the visitor who in the past would have accompanied Walpole or his housekeeper. The image in the latter guidebook reinforces the emptiness of the room. Walpole is living author in the original text. In the latter, he is part alive and part deceased; the objects of the room are part present and part absent. The tenses shift between present day description and past tense explanation of what was. This retrospective is enlivened by the room steward and the tour guide, as well as the kangaroo.

It is possible to take a performance perspective to the guidebook and visit to the Tribune. So too, the visitor's dramatic response to the installation in the room. Jack and Phipps (2003, 283) suggest that a guidebook has interactive qualities to it. It instructs the reader and so is apodemic and performative. This, they qualify as follows: 'Apodemic literature is a didactic, instructional literature which exerts a significant performative role upon the reader'. The term derives from 16-18th century instructional tour manuals, the precursor to the modern guidebook. It is more subjective and interpretative than the 'non-personal media' suggested by Timothy and Boyd (2003, 220). Such a performance approach to tourism is reflexive and a modern-day paradox for Minca and Oakes (2006, 13) in that we seek difference to reconfirm a sense of order and place. Potentially, in these subject-object binaries of tourist visiting Strawberry Hill, as well as in volunteering and working back stage, there is an ontological certainty reified in the place: the eighteenth century leisured class reinforced their position and status in society by visiting Walpole's retreat, and the modern-day visitor – largely retired – has their nostalgia for a more certain and stable past assuaged and their cultural capital maintained. To corrupt Lowenthal, it is the modern-day visitors' present that has become a foreign country.

Strawberry Hill House, like other stately homes (cf. Johnson 1999), has been 'framed' in a specific past. Once this framing came through the objects viewed for their spatial quality, for where they came from. Now, in the absence of the objects, the temporal dimension is sold to the visitor through the tour. Each room allows one to travel in social history to the everyday life of the ruling class in the house in Georgian times. The interplay of object, guidebook narrative and audience is minimized in Strawberry Hill by the dearth of objects in favour of an interplay between text and the imagination – between the written and physical text and the reader and viewer's mind. The guidebook is very much the dynamic text mediating the place and the people from the past to the present. It is a performance still, nevertheless. Marion Harney, in *Place-Making for the Imagination*, her detailed study of Walpole and his Strawberry Hill House, suggests that the house has an 'architecture of death' (Harney 2013, 163) about it in its associations with monastic and religious buildings that Walpole had visited. His Gothic pilgrimages were brought back home in the styles and objects that were integrated together in the structure of the house. The end result was 'the first purpose-built antiquarian "museum" interior, a sequence of theatrical spaces' (Harney 2013, 4). The sum of all these parts is an evocative, sensational structure that elicits an emotional reaction and associates where possible a medieval dynastic 'origins'. Asymmetry and irregularity are *de rigeur* as befits the man and his dwelling. Within the Tribune, she notes a mood-altering changeable light that plays with the visitor. This is 'masquerade in stone' and glass to add to Emma McEvoy's (2016) examination of the house as an example of contemporary gothic tourism. It is 'an immersive

art environment' (McEvoy 2016, 31) even without the Laura Ford exhibition. Each room is a walk-in painting, a scene or representation from other images for her or a site-specific performance space with each ticketholder an audience member to Walpole's dramas. This is 'elaborate human theatre' (McEvoy 2016, 37) with *élan*.

Conclusion

Walpole coined the term that describes the effect of a visit to his asymmetrical fantasy: "serendipity," the glory of a chance meeting. Ford's meetings have the quality that Freud called *unheimlich*, unfamiliar and indeterminately nightmarish. (Green 2015)

Visiting Strawberry Hill House has been shown to be an experience that provokes a reaction from the visitor from dramatic foot stomp to exclamation of desire to live in a house such as this. The range is extensive, from 'serendipity' to 'unheimlich' (Green 2015) with Ford's exhibition. Laura Ford saw a marriage between her figurative work and the house exposing it. She creates larger-than-life figures and places them to get an emotional response from the viewer. This is not dissimilar from Walpole's designs for the rooms in his house and the placing of his objects throughout. There was a fit in terms of the humour of the place and her sculptures. For the curator of the exhibition, Stephen Feeke, there was a "duality of elegance and the gothic" (Feeke 2015) in the location that gave it a site-specific edge. As he continues, "Strawberry Hill House is a wonderful empty shell with atmosphere to repopulate with Laura's work. The challenge for people is to find those links" (Feeke 2015). The kangaroo sculpture had an apposite place in the Tribune Room. The room is empty but her pouch looks like she has stolen objects from the room. There is also a startled guilty look on her face, one that probably matches some of the looks on the visitors' faces as they react to Walpole's guilty pleasures.

Despite being relatively empty, the Tribune Room and others do provide enough texture, context and surround for the visitor to realise their imagination from the guidebook - what Peel and Sørensen (2017, 209) describe as a dynamic 'condenser of information'. This is enhanced further with another level of interactivity by the room steward, or the tour guide, though neither were included in the digital images taken by the visitors as memories of the place and experience, collectables in their own rights. This article, though, shows first-hand how the guidebook acts *in loco parentis* for the guide and as a prompt for the steward - in this case for myself and a man who was born nearly three hundred years before me. We both gaze and are gazed upon in this cycle of heritage manufacture. There might be no living characters embodying Walpole or re-enacting Georgian scenarios or episodes from Walpole's life - and his letters do incentivize this approach - but instead, there is a dramatic backdrop for the imagination to fill in, a guided (almost) blank canvas for the visitor.

References

- Bruner, Ed 2005: *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel*. London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bunten, Alexis 2015: *So How Long have you Been Native? Life as an Alaska Native Tour Guide*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohen, Erik 1985: The Tourist Guide: The Origins, Structure and Dynamics of a Role. *Annals of Tourism Research* 12, 5-29.
- Costa, Kelli 2009: *The Coach Fellas: Heritage and Tourism in Ireland*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast.

- Fallowell, Duncan 2010: The dandy of Strawberry Hill. *Prospect Magazine*, 27 February 2010, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/the-dandy-of-strawberry-hill>, accessed 1 October 2016.
- Feeke, Stephen 2015: Laura Ford talk. Strawberry Hill House, 18 June 2015.
- Feldman, Jackie 2008: *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag: Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli National Identity*. Oxford: Berghahn Publications.
- Green, Dominic 2015: Laura Ford at Strawberry Hill. Dispatch, *New Criterion*, 30 July 2015, <https://www.newcriterion.com/blogs/dispatch/laura-ford-at-strawberry-hill>, accessed 17 September 2017.
- Harney, Marion 2013: *Place-Making for the Imagination: Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Johnson, Nuala 1999: Framing the past: time, space and the politics of heritage tourism in Ireland. *Political Geography* 18, 187–207.
- Kennedy, Maev 2015: Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole's fantasy castle, to open its doors again. *The Guardian* 25 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/feb/25/strawberry-hill-horace-walpole-gothic-castle-otranto-open-again>, accessed 1 November 2016.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 1995: Reviewed Theorizing Heritage. *Ethnomusicology* 39:3, 367–380.
- Lewis, WS (ed.) 1937-1983: *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, <http://images.library.yale.edu/hwcorrespondence/>, accessed 5 January 2017.
- Lowenthal, David 1985: *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacCannell, Dean 1992: *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers*. London: Routledge.
- Macdonald, Sharon 2006: Mediating heritage: Tour guides at the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds, Nuremberg. *Tourist Studies* 6:2, 119–138.
- McEvoy, Emma 2016: *Gothic Tourism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Minca, Claudio & Timothy Oakes 2006: Introduction: Traveling Paradoxes. In: Claudio Minca and Timothy Oakes (eds), *Travels in Paradox: remapping tourism*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., pp. 1-22.
- Peel, Victoria & Anders Sørensen 2016: *Exploring the Use and Impact of Travel Guidebooks*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.
- Sabor, Peter 1995: Preface. In: Peter Sabor (ed.), *Horace Walpole: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, pp. xiii-xv.
- Salazar, Noel. 2010: *Envisioning Eden: Mobilising Imaginaries in Tourism and Beyond*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Seaton, Anthony 2002: Tourism as metempsychosis and metensomatosis: The personae of the eternal recurrence. In: Graham Dann (ed.), *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World*. Wallingford: CAB International, pp. 135-168.
- SHH 2015a: Types of Visitor. Strawberry Hill House training document. Unpublished handout.
- SHH 2015b: Mission Statement. Strawberry Hill House training document. Unpublished handout.

- SHH 2015c: What is a room steward? Strawberry Hill House training document. Unpublished handout.
- SHH 2016: *A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole at Strawberry-Hill near Twickenham, Middlesex*. Twickenham: The Strawberry Hill Trust.
- Skinner, Jonathan 2010: Leading Questions and Body Memories: A Case of Phenomenology and Physical Ethnography in the Dance Interview. In: Anselma Gallinat and Peter Collins (eds), *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 111-128.
- Strong, William 1843: *Strawberry Hill: A Catalogue*. 'Strawberry Hill - Extracted from the Gentleman's Magazine, Bentley's Miscellany, Ainsworth's Magazine, &c.' pp. 9-11. Bristol: J. Chilcott Printers.
- Timothy, Dallen & Stephen Boyd 2003: *Heritage Tourism*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Walpole, Horace 1747: Letter to Harry Conway, 8 June 1747. *Letters Volume 37* Letters, 25 January 1737 OS - 10 December 1758. Pp.269-271, <http://images.library.yale.edu/hwcorrespondence/page.asp>, accessed 3 February 2017.
- Walpole, Horace 1753: Letter to Thomas Mann, 27 April 1753. *Letters Volume 20, 15 November 1748 - 18 September 1756*. Pp.371-374, <http://images.library.yale.edu/hwcorrespondence/page.asp>, accessed 3 February 2017.
- Walpole, Horace 1784: *A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole*. Thomas Kirkgate: Strawberry Hill, <https://archive.org/details/descriptionofvil00walp>, accessed 2 September 2016.
- Walsh, Kevin 1992: *The Representation of the Past: Museums and heritage in the post-modern world*. London: Routledge.
- Wynn, Jonathan 2010: *The Tour Guide: Walking and Talking New York*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ⁱ The author is grateful for the support of staff, tour guides and students in writing this article, and for advice and corrections. Congratulations too to Matthew and Manisha on their engagement in the Tribune Room, Saturday 25th August 2018.

ⁱⁱ Addendum: since reviewing this article, to save money, Strawberry Hill House stopped including the guidebook in the tour at the start of the 2017 season. It is now for sale for £2 in the shop and a map of the tour is given to the tourists instead.